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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: SOCIALISTS LEAD POLLS FOR SATURDAY'S VOTE; LATE SUPPORT FOR NEW EXTREMIST PARTY

Ref: (A) SOFIA 0067, (B) SOFIA 808, (C) SOFIA 931, (D) SOFIA 1020, (E) SOFIA 1036

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The opposition Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) retains a comfortable lead over the ruling party for the June 25 general election according to all reputable opinion polls released as the 30-day campaign draws to a close. Surveys show the Socialists appear poised to win the most seats in the next parliament but will likely fall short of an absolute majority. This would force the BSP to seek support from the ruling National Movement for Simeon II (NMSS) or the ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) to form a government. The final International Republican Institute (IRI) survey shows the Socialists are expected to have 95-105 MPs in the 240-seat parliament. The PM's party, which has failed to build on its strong record and narrow the gap with the BSP, is estimated to win around 60 MP seats. Originally considered a fringe group, the extreme nationalist group "Ataka" has seen a surge of support in recent days. Many analysts think the group may achieve the four percent threshold needed to enter parliament, where it would be a potentially disruptive force. During the late stages of the campaign, BSP leader Stanishev, also the party's PM nominee, reiterated that the Socialists would immediately withdraw Bulgaria's troops from Iraq should they come to power. END SUMMARY

12. (SBU) All polls indicate the Socialists, whose last stint in government was ended by mass protests in early 1997, will emerge with the most seats after the election (Refs B, D). The well-organized BSP, the political party with the longest history and the most developed regional structures, enjoys a 10-percent lead over the ruling party as of June 15, the IRI poll showed. Support for the Socialists edged up to 26 percent from 23 percent a month earlier. A survey by Bulgaria's reputable Alpha Research polling agency suggests the gap between the BSP and NMSS is even greater - 13 percent. According to the IRI, a big part of the undecided voters are also likely to back the poll-leading Socialists. The BSP could come close to an absolute majority in case of low turnout or if any of the small center-right parties do not pass the four percent threshold, because under Bulgaria's complex proportional representation system, the largest party gets the lion's share of the redistributed votes (Ref. E). The poll also showed 39-year BSP Chairman Stanishev to be the preferred future prime minister with 22 percent support in June, ahead of incumbent Simeon Saxe-Coburg Gotha with 18 percent, and well ahead of the center-right opposition leaders. Although Iraq has not become a major campaign issue, Stanishev has recently played to the 70 percent public opposition to Government policy in Iraq by restating that the Socialists would immediately withdraw Bulgaria's military contingent from Iraq should they come to power. (Ref. A)

13. (SBU) The NMSS, which in contrast with the BSP has poorly developed regional political structures and lacks party organization, has failed to build on its successes and narrow the gap with the BSP (Ref. C, D). Its sharp switch to an anti-BSP course in a move to attract the soft center-right electorate did not help, and support for the ex-king's party was unchanged at 16 percent in mid-June compared to a month earlier. The popularity of Saxe-Coburg, whose cabinet became only the second Bulgarian post-communist government to complete its full four-year term, has also edged down. In June, 31 percent say the PM did a good or a very good job compared to 34 percent in May. The number of those who believe Simeon, the first European monarch to regain power as prime minister, deserves re-election has remained unchanged at 25 percent. In 2001, Simeon's movement won a landslide victory with 43 percent of the vote.

14. (SBU) The month-long-campaign has not brought a surge in support for the weakened and fractious center-right either, and the three center-right groups remain out of the key race. The main opposition center-right coalition, led by the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), continued to lose ground as support for it edged down to 7.0 percent in June from 8.0 percent in May. Some analysts say that a worse-than-expected showing on the part of Nadezhda Mihailova's UDF could be one of the surprise outcomes from Saturday's election. Ex-PM Ivan Kostov's party, the Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB), and the coalition of Sofia Mayor Stefan Sofianski (the Union of Free Democrats or UFD) have, however, stabilized their electoral support at around 4.0 percent each, meaning that both groups have chances to enter the next parliament.

15. (SBU) In perhaps the biggest surprise of the election so far, all polls register a late surge over the past month in support of

the extreme nationalist group Ataka which campaigns under the motto "Let's Give Bulgaria Back to Bulgarians". The group's leader, Volen Siderov, a well-known journalist, is openly anti-Semitic and anti-U.S. Ataka opposes membership in the EU and NATO, is anti-Roma and anti-Turkish and seeks closer ties with Russia. It is winning the protest vote of people living in the margins of society, some young people and voters with extreme leftist and rightist views who are against the status quo. Polls show that for the first time in post-communist elections, a nationalist group stands a chance to cross the four percent threshold and enter

parliament. This would be a major change for Bulgaria, a country with a moderate and tolerant history.

16. (SBU) Exit poll results will be announced after polling stations close at 7 p.m. Preliminary results are expected to be announced by the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) before midnight. Final results for parties and coalitions are published by CEC within four days of the vote, and the list of names of newly-elected MPs is announced in seven days (Ref. E).

17. (SBU) COMMENT: Based on polling data, the Socialists appear set for a victory in the Saturday election which will likely result in the formation of a BSP-led government. However, since the BSP may not have a majority, other coalition scenarios are possible, especially given Bulgaria's track record for political surprises. Ataka, the surprise in this campaign, would have a larger platform for its extremist views if it makes it to parliament, and may tarnish Bulgaria's image as the country finalizes its accession to the EU. END COMMENT